



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living

Breaking Open the Word
Mary Birmingham

Twenty Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time A



Parable of the Two Sons



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening prayer

Option 1: Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2: Use the prayer provided below.

Prayer to Seek God Continually

St. Augustine of Hippo

O Lord my God,
I believe in you,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...
Insofar as I can,
Insofar as you have given me the power,
I have sought you.
I became weary and I laboured.
O Lord my God,
My sole hope,
help me to believe
And never to cease seeking you.
Grant that I may always and ardently
Seek out your countenance.
Give me the strength to seek you,
For you help me to find you
And you have more and more given me
the hope of finding you.
Here I am before you
With my firmness and my infirmity.
Preserve the first and heal the second..
Here I am before you
With my strength and my ignorance.
Where you have opened the door to me,
Welcome me at the entrance;
Where you have closed the door to me,
Open to my cry;
Enable me to remember you,
To understand you,
And to love you.

Amen.

**Catholic
Faith, Life
& Creed**
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Liturgical Context

- ▶ The Gospels reveal that Jesus is inching toward his final destiny.
- ▶ Jesus' catechism on Christian living continues today. He insists that right action speaks louder than right words.
- ▶ We can proclaim the gospel, but if we do not live it; it is nothing but empty words.
- ▶ The greatest witness to Christ is a well-lived life. Words can be flowery, powerful and inspiring, but if not backed up by a well-lived life, then the words are meaningless and hypocritical.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

First reading: Ezekiel 18, 25-28

- ▶ God called the Old Testament prophets to reveal the mind, will and heart of God to the people.
- ▶ The people's response to God was conversion, repentance and the commitment to bring their lives into conformity with God's mind heart and will.
- ▶ Ezekiel insists that it is never too late to repent and turn one's life over to God.
- ▶ Ezekiel insists that God invites his children to transform their lives and turn from sin and evil and turn toward God and his will for good in the lives of his children.
- ▶ Ezekiel is also meditating on the difference between communal versus individual responsibility for sin.
- ▶ Prior to Ezekiel the primary paradigm regarding sin was communal. The people of Israel sinned as a people. There was corporate responsibility. The sin of one impacted the entire community.
- ▶ The people's sense of shared responsibility was so ingrained in their consciousness that they believed that future generations would share the responsibility for the sin of their ancestors.
- ▶ Israel understood itself in terms of the community. As far as Israel was concerned there was no life outside the community.
- ▶ The destruction of the formal institutional and organized life of Israel, a byproduct and result of the Babylonian exile resulted in a new focus on the individual within the tradition.
- ▶ Communal responsibility for sin was still professed, but more attention was given to the individual and his or her own culpability. Ezekiel refused to let the people pass the blame for their sins onto past generations. Their present oppression and suffering was the result of both corporate and personal sins. Everyone had a part to play, community and individual alike.
- ▶ They dare not claim innocence.
- ▶ In spite of the self-recriminations, Ezekiel held out a ray of hope.

- ▶ God was calling the people to repentance and metanoia. If they would but heed his invitation, God would spare them from their current suffering.
- ▶ The people were once again exhorted to turn their lives completely over to God's merciful care, to return to forged with God. It was up to them.



Mystagogy reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ What evidence is there in your life that you have followed the prophet's invitation and turned your life over to God?
- ▶ Just what does it mean to turn one's life over to God?
- ▶ Our sense of individual sin is far greater than any sense of communal sin. In what way does a community sin?
- ▶ Have you ever experienced the sin of a community? Please explain. What did you learn from the experience?

Second Reading: Philippians 2, 1-11

- ▶ The hymn in today's reading is a testament to the first faith of the early Church.
- ▶ The hymn is a profession of faith in the preexistence of Jesus and the kenosis and humiliation he endured as a result of his Incarnation, passion and death.
- ▶ The hymn further extols his glorification at his Father's right hand insisting that he is worthy of our honor and worship.
- ▶ The hymn refers to Jesus' Incarnation as a self-emptying, a kenosis in which Jesus rejected the praise he was entitled to as God's divine Son.
- ▶ Paul wrote to his beloved community in order to encourage them to nurture their communal relationships.
- ▶ Paul instructed them to imitate Christ and his kenosis.
- ▶ This Christological hymn is proclaimed every Passion Sunday.
- ▶ Christ did not seek glory, but glory and suffering were the cornerstones of his redemption.
- ▶ Jesus was content to assume the role of a slave. He willingly emptied himself and relinquished his own honor and his life in the pursuit and accomplishment of God's plan of salvation.
- ▶ Jesus relinquished all control of his life; he gave up everything in order to bring God's will to fruition.
- ▶ Paul challenges readers to follow Christ's example, to become powerless, to live for others and sacrifice self for the sake of the kingdom.

- ▶ Even though the journey is fraught with Christ's own pain and suffering it is nevertheless the only passageway to our final destination.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story or reflection from his or her life.

- ▶ In what way, if any, is this letter a relevant letter today?
- ▶ If someone were to ask you to profess your belief in Jesus, what would you say? Who is Christ for you?
- ▶ What does it mean to you that we are called to be powerless? How might you embrace that powerlessness in your own life in response to those God has put in your path?
- ▶ What does Paul's letter have to teach us about Jesus and his relationship with us?
- ▶ What does it mean to you that we are called to embrace Christ's own suffering for the sake of the Gospel? How might you do that in your everyday life?
- ▶ What are the obstacles to following through with Paul's constant exhortation that we are all called to embrace the cross of Christ and his suffering for the sake of others?

Gospel: Matthew 21, 28-32

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
- ▶ Jesus continues to teach the people in parable. His catechism on Christian living and what it means to be a citizen in the new reign of God continues in today's Gospel.
- ▶ The context for the parable is the conflict between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees.
- ▶ Jesus responds to their effort to trip him up by turning the tables on them. He brings up the origin of John the Baptist's baptism.
- ▶ Jesus exposed their deceitfulness.

- ▶ Jesus placed their hypocrisy squarely before them; if they believed in John's God-given authority, then they had to admit their own refusal to follow his exhortation to complete metanoia, conversion and repentance as well as John's revelation of the Christ.
- ▶ Conversely if they accuse him of being a fraud they ingratiate themselves with the people who regard him as a great prophet of the Lord's.
- ▶ Jesus backs them into a corner. Their fear of the crowds prompted their non-commitment to either position.
- ▶ The parable is a quiet rebuke of the Pharisees for their refusal to listen to John, change their lives and repent before God. It is also a rebuke of the violence they will eventually perpetrate against Jesus.
- ▶ Depending on whether one's position is in accord with the Pharisees or with Jesus, today's parable is either a warning or a consolation.
- ▶ Parables open listeners to the truth in ways simple words cannot. Stories speak louder than teaching or preaching. No one can argue with a story; it simply is.
- ▶ Listener's either accept or reject the story's premise. It is up to the listener to decide. No one forces a conclusion.
- ▶ Listeners cannot remain passive; they are forced to form an opinion or conclusion to the parable. Parables are so surprising and oft times shocking that it is difficult not to be impacted by them. Listeners cannot remain neutral.
- ▶ Listeners of the parable are invited look within and discern where transformation is needed and affirm where it is not.
- ▶ Jesus was dealing with the elite and educated religious leaders of the community; they were formidable foes. They were neither ignorant nor naive.
- ▶ They were experts in the art of Midrash and parable. They were not fools; they knew that Jesus' parables were directed toward them; they easily saw themselves in the characters of the stories.
- ▶ Their anger was palpable. Unwelcomed self-revelation is hard to swallow when no one is in the mood to taste.
- ▶ They set out to destroy Jesus.
- ▶ The son who agreed to do what the father asked and then failed to follow through metaphorically represented the Pharisees. Pharisees preached obedience but their refusal to be obedient rendered them ineffectual hypocrites.
- ▶ They could "talk the talk," but then they ignored the walk.
- ▶ Words without action mean absolutely nothing.
- ▶ The worst unrepentant sinner can speak of holiness; but if it is not lived it is anything but authentic.
- ▶ Matthew's primary leitmotif insists that one need only consider a person's actions in order to test his or her convictions.
- ▶ The son who initially refused to obey his father then relented and ultimately did what his father asked, represented former sinners who took heed of the Baptist's call to repentance. They repented and transformed their lives. They turned toward God and were given a place as honored citizens in the newly established kingdom.
- ▶ Neither son was a model child; neither son was sinless. Yet the son who

eventually obeyed his father at least illustrated his change of heart and desire for repentance and intimate relationship with his father.

- ▶ He appreciated the love and gratuitous forgiveness his father always gave him and chose to do what pleased him; he responded to his father's love with love and obedience.
- ▶ Matthew's main accusation against the Pharisees is that they spoke the truth, but did not live it.
- ▶ Jesus cleverly turned the tables to get them to point the finger of guilt at themselves. He asked them which son was truly the obedient son. There was only one possible response.
- ▶ Jesus refused to let them off the hook; he explicitly emphasized his premise.
- ▶ The sinners and outcasts, those hated and looked down upon by every self-righteous believer, tax collectors and prostitutes, are the very ones who heard the voice of the Baptist, transformed their lives and obeyed God's will.
- ▶ They would be first in line to enter God's kingdom.
- ▶ All who make a showy display of piety, yet change nothing and do nothing are really the non-repentant sinners.
- ▶ Even John the Baptist wondered if Pharisees could consider themselves included in the family of God if they refused to repent.
- ▶ Jesus insists that only those who repent and comply with God's will can be called God's children.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix for an example.

- ▶ In what way is this a relevant word for us today?
- ▶ What is the primary message of this Gospel?
- ▶ In what way does this parable teach us about the kingdom of God and what it means to be a citizen of that kingdom?
- ▶ What does today's Gospel teach you about God and God's relationship with human beings?
- ▶ Put yourself in the place of the two sons. Have you [or anyone you have known] ever given lip service to doing the right thing, but then did absolutely nothing? On the other hand, have you ever grumbled and complained and said "no" to doing the right thing, but then in the end did the right thing after all? How do you feel about those two positions?
- ▶ What are the possible consequences of both positions?
- ▶ What does this parable teach us?

- ▶ How does this parable speak to your life right now?
- ▶ Is there something [an event, a situation] in your life in which the words, “actions speak louder than words” are appropriately relevant? How might Jesus speak to your situation in light of today’s gospel?
- ▶ In what way is this a word for your parish community?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in your way of living the challenges of this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this parable teach us about living in the kingdom of God?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today’s liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God’s call?

Concluding Prayer

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

Appendix

- In what way does this parable teach us about the kingdom of God and what it means to be a citizen of that kingdom?

Jesus invites us to look at our lives. A few years ago my husband started a ministry to homeless people. He and other people in the ministry provided safe shelter to homeless people when the weather plummeted below forty degrees in our small Florida city.

One Christmas season those in ministry spent thirty straight overnights with the homeless. Nearing the end of those thirty days he occasionally grumbled on his way out the door. He often expressed frustration with the fellows and their lack of hygiene and motivation. He understood that each person had a story of brokenness, yet he felt powerless to help him or her. His efforts did little to change their lot. He simply offered the compassion of Christ.

There were times he expressed disdain for having to sleep on the gym floor; insisting that it was someone else's turn to step up to the plate. Yet, like the son who initially said no and yet ultimately did what his father asked, he continued to spend each night listening to their stories and offering them the dignity they deserved as children of God. The men loved my husband for treating them with respect and demanding nothing in return for his efforts.

A few of the most pious people in the community were mean-spirited and hostile toward his efforts. "How dare we open our doors to such people. They are dangerous", they complained. One daily communicant said we should put them all on a boat and take them out in the middle of the ocean and let them drift into perpetuity.

Love, however, covers a multitude of sins and today's parable illustrates that truth in triplicate. Jesus will ask us if we emptied ourselves in service of the kingdom. He will ask us the extent to which we loved those God put on our earthy path and sojourn.

If I am serious about living in the kingdom of God then I must acknowledge my sinfulness and my reluctance to do what God asks of me and then forge ahead anyway. If I respond to God's initiative like the son who responded in the affirmative to God's request then subsequently did nothing, I risk God's rejection of me.

God does not keep a scorecard; we are not told how much work the other son accomplished after he said yes. We are only told that he responded. We should rejoice with every fiber of our being to God's invitation, but since we are sinners such rejoicing is often lacking.

We might ask with whom we would rather work, the one who said yes and then did nothing or the one who grumbled and then completed the task. It is obvious whom we would choose. I would rather have ten people like my husband, than one overly

righteous person who did nothing when asked.

The former is honest; he or she always follows through with the task to which he or she committed. Their compassion for others is what motivates and propels them to action. Such love covers a multitude of sins, for that we can be most grateful. My hope that I will be obedient to God's will when asked rests with the truth that God loves me unconditionally, just as I am, while inviting me to be more than I can be. God even accepts my eleventh hour responses to him. Today's parable promises me that much.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Sin and Grace
Jesus Christ
Incarnation
Scripture and Revelation

Faith
Prayer
Sacraments
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well. Choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

SIN AND GRACE

Today's parable of the two sons—one complains but still does the will of his father. The other paid lip service yet did nothing. Parables open up the truth in ways that nothing else can. No one can argue with a parable. It is a story. What is, simply or not so simply-- is. No one is forced to accept a certain position. One accepts, rejects or writes the conclusion to the story themselves. The listener is forced to form an opinion. Parables are so shocking that it is difficult to remain neutral. Parables invite the listener to either convict or acquit himself or herself of attitudinal sin. Since the bottom line question in this parable is: who really sinned, it is fitting that we explore what the Church teaches about the mystery of SIN AND GRACE.

JESUS CHRIST

Today's Gospel Jesus is exercising his role as teacher and as Lord. He challenges the minds and hearts of those who thought they were righteous in God's eyes. Only God can judge the hearts of people. Through all these weeks of teaching about the kingdom and what it means to live in the kingdom reveals Christ and his mission to the world. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about our Lord and Savior JESUS CHRIST.

INCARNATION OF JESUS

The hymn in Philippians professes the divine preexistence of Jesus and the abasement he endured because of his incarnation and death. It also extols his glorification and the worship due him by all creation. Christ's incarnation is understood as a kenosis—a self-emptying-- that required Jesus to renounce the glory that was due him as equal Son of the Father. It is thus appropriate to focus our attention on the INCARNATION OF JESUS.

SCRIPTURE AND REVELATION I or II

Jesus is the revelation of God. Jesus teaches us the mind and heart of God and his plan for establishing his kingdom on earth as we await the kingdom yet to come. He reminds us that we are to examine our lives. Jesus reveals God's plan to us. He reveals God to all believers. That revelation continues in God's revealed, holy word. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention today on **SCRIPTURE AND REVELATION I or II**.

FAITH

Paul's letter to the Philippians reminds readers that the attitude of all believers must be that of Christ. Believers were taught that they must assume Jesus' attitude. Believers were to take on the mind of Christ. By embracing the mind and heart of Christ Christians would then be given the necessary grace to love as God loves them. It is a tall undertaking that requires conversion of mind and heart—it requires deep abiding faith. The letter to the Philippians today offers us an opportunity to focus our attention on **FAITH**.

PRAYER

Paul's letter to the Philippians reminds readers that the attitude of all believers must be that of Christ. Believers were taught that they must assume Jesus' attitude. Believers were to take on the mind of Christ. By embracing the mind and heart of Christ Christians would then be given the necessary grace to love as God loves them. One can only embrace the mind and heart of Christ if one is committed to a life of prayer and sacrifice. The letter to the Philippians today offers us an opportunity to focus our attention on **PRAYER**.

SACRAMENTS

Every Sunday liturgy is an opportunity to unpack the mystery of the sacraments. The Paschal Mystery is made present on the altar of sacrifice. Christ's presence is made manifest in the sacrament being celebrated before us. It is thus opportune for us to focus our attention on the **SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH**.

EUCCHARIST SERIES:

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Thus any Sunday would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part ____ of the Eucharistic Series.